

5/04/2008 MidAmerica Nazarene University Commencement Address

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May 4, 2008

President Robinson, faculty and staff, graduates and parents, I am honored by the invitation to join you today. Earlier this year I visited the campus of Mid America Nazarene and last month on Palm Sunday attended Sunday morning services here at College Church. Every association I have had with this college, both in Washington, D.C. and here in Olathe has left me with a strong belief that this college is truly a remarkable institution of higher learning.

While I am honored to be here, almost from the day I accepted the invitation I have regretted it. Addressing a graduating class is one of the most difficult speeches to give. It is difficult to express one's view of the meaning of life in a meaningful way or to describe the definition of success in a successful way.

I also know the hope that each of you has that the commencement address will be brief-perhaps some insightful commentary on the world and your lives in it-but not too much commentary. You are hoping that the speaker has something to say that is meaningful-but short. Having agreed to speak to you, I really do want to do my best to leave you with some suggestions as you leave college life behind and enter a new phase of life, but if I fail I hope you will at least be able to give me credit for being brief.

Your education at Mid America Nazarene has undoubtedly prepared you well for a job. But more importantly we are called to make a life. Not to make a dollar, but to make a difference. Not just to find happiness, but to pursue usefulness-to seek the good, the true and most importantly the eternal. Success is not achieving wealth, power and fame. Always remember that no job, regardless of money; no indulgence, however tempting; nothing can take the place of a life committed to something other than yourself. Life is more than just being comfortable-in fact comfort may be the enemy. This nation will not be better off because we have one more millionaire, but will be better if one more person lives his or her life with integrity committed to serving his or her fellow man.

From my own experience I can tell you that satisfaction does not come from economic well being, status or power in our nation's capital. There is nothing in my background that would suggest that I would grow up to become a Member of Congress-no financial or political heritage in my family-my Dad worked in the oil fields of Western Kansas and my Mom was the lady you paid your electric bill to in my small hometown of Plainville, Kansas. I am a first generation college graduate that happened to find politics and government interesting. So I set a goal of being a member of the United States House of Representatives. With the help of a great many people I succeeded in reaching that goal twelve years ago. Being elected to Congress was something I really wanted and a sense of great satisfaction with my life should have attached following my election. Despite my success there was still something missing. When we set goals for ourselves, even when the goal is met, we are left feeling empty and unsatisfied. For satisfaction in life comes not in meeting the goals we establish for ourselves; but instead living a life in accordance with God's will-satisfying God's plan for our lives.

Proverbs 3:5-9 tells us:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart;

Lean not on your own understanding;

In all your ways acknowledge him

and he will make your paths straight.

After the election and the excitement of being sworn in as a member of the United States Congress had worn off, I needed a little straightening of my paths. Fortunately, a group back in my home church was praying for me. They were praying for me the prayer of the apostle Paul found in Colossians 1:9-12:

...since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to

fill you with the knowledge of His will... And we pray this in order that you may live a life

worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way;

My friends' prayer helped me come to understand that God had placed in my life a great opportunity to be of service to my fellow man. I was not elected to office to elevate my standing in this world or to satisfy my ego, but rather to the best of my ability to live a life in service to God. I am here to reaffirm Mid America Nazarene's Statement of Belief when it says: "[An individual's] highest sense of satisfaction arises from a personal relationship to God and a comprehensive stewardship of life."

We are often told that our country is in need of great leaders; but I believe we are in need of great servants-just as Jesus humbled himself to be a servant-not the leader of an army, but a servant who washed His disciples' feet. So graduates, I challenge you to imitate Christ's humility:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourself. Each of you should look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3-4.

Although many in my generation have worked to make the world a better place, our country needs you and your generation to answer the call to serve. We face great challenges. Just watching the evening news can be depressing.

We see horrible things thought unthinkable just a few years ago. To have any hope of addressing our society's problems we must recognize that there is right and wrong-and that it's not relative, it is absolute.

Alexis De Tocqueville, the French writer who studied our country in the early 1800s, observed, "Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of [America's] genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

There is a strong desire this election year for "change." While change will happen-we will have a new president; to really effectuate change in America, we need the American people to change.

Each of you graduates can make a remarkable difference in this world.

James 1:27

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

If Americans are "good" our country can again be great.

Over the last two decades many Christians have become more involved in the political process-trying to improve the human condition by governmental action. It wouldn't surprise you that I welcome participation in politics and government by Christians. But Christians should remember the human condition is one of sin and our primary mission as followers of Jesus Christ is not at the ballot box but rather at the church alter, saving souls. Christians often put too much faith in man-made institutions and too little faith in God.

If Christians would better fulfill biblical instructions, we would see the change in our nation that is being called for. The most successful health, education and welfare program ever created are moms and dads, families, churches and communities. Government has no monopoly on compassion. Indeed government is compassion's least able practitioner. It is up to Christian citizens to renew their commitments in not only caring for our families, but also for our neighbors when help is needed. To be effective, charity and assistance to others must be spiritual and personal. I believe that those individuals who volunteer their time to work in their neighborhoods, churches and schools and that do so in a way that witnesses to their faith in Jesus will have the greatest impact on people's lives. Indeed the consequence of this involvement, this witness is far greater than any government or state program or the result of any election.

I've seen an amazing example of service to others during the last year. A year ago today, the city of Greensburg, Kansas was destroyed by the most powerful tornado to hit the U.S. in eight years. The tornado leveled the entire community, claimed 11 lives, caused numerous injuries and left hundreds homeless. In those disastrous times, I saw the best in people. When I walked through Greensburg in the days after the storm, what struck me was the outpouring of concern for their neighbors that was shown by the citizens of Greensburg, by Kansans, and by the people of our nation. Rescue crews, volunteers and donations from neighboring towns, including from here in Olathe, flowed into town. At the grocery store in the neighboring community of Haviland, I watched as customers placed groceries on the counter. The grocery store owner asked, "Where are you from?" When the answer was Greensburg, the shopkeeper responded, "No charge." In Kansas, we help our neighbors, and Greensburg is now rebuilding strong.

Do something to help somebody else and you will continue to work toward your highest potential as servants of Christ and His Church. Maintain a personal relationship with God and seek His will for your life. Recognize that success comes not from the things that we accumulate for ourselves, but by living a life in service to others.

And face the future with the realization that you can make a difference and that the change we desire in our country comes in large part by changing ourselves. We have every right to be hopeful for our lives and our futures. Despite the challenges God does not fail us.

I gained from my grandfather, a Nazarene, a love for hymns:

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father

Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide

Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow

Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

The world is a large and wonderful place and it is your time to step into it. You are armed with your college education and the character bred into you by family, faculty and friends. You are poised at the threshold of the rest of your life. The challenges are large and the way uncertain, the responsibilities enormous and our own abilities limited.

Our small voice tells God, "I don't know where we are going."

And God answers: "We are going forward, into the future I have shaped for you."

"But I don't know where that is"

And God answers, "I do; let's go."

"But I am afraid"

And God says: "Of course you are. Any sensible person would be. Let's go."

And we say, "But can I do all that is given to me to do?"

And God says, "I have made you, I am with you to the end. Take my hand. Let's go."

So as you graduate, you begin today with the God who made you, you walk with the God who guides you and you find completion with the God who loves you.

We need a chance to change the world. And God has always given us that. Never have the difficulties been greater. But go with the knowledge that God is with you.

Congratulations to the Class of 2008.

